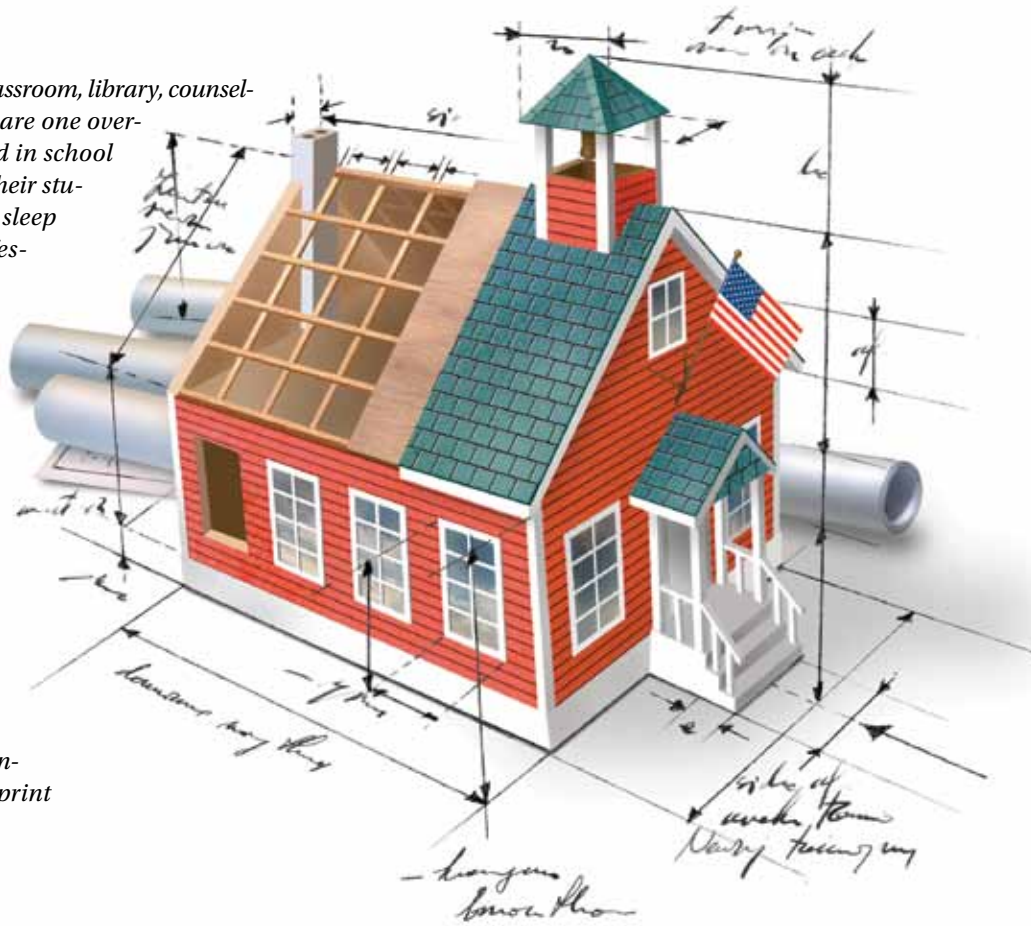


*The AFT is committed to supporting these unsung heroes. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—not just their accomplishments, but also their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.*

School systems sometimes make promises they have no intention of keeping. Other times, they can deliver a world of opportunities to our neediest children. They may or may not want to listen to parents or even teachers, but school systems always attend to the demands of the most powerful individuals and institutions in their communities. For the last 20 years, I've been working and organizing to build power through my local union—Education Austin.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NENAD JAKESEVIC



## Teaching and Learning the Hard Way

I started teaching in 1987 at Blackshear Elementary School in Austin, Texas, as a second-grade bilingual teacher. Just eight years earlier, Austin had been ordered by the U.S. Supreme Court to bus

students; it was one of the last major urban school districts to come under a court-ordered desegregation plan. The district complied, busing students at all levels beginning in 1980. In 1986, a new school board was elected on a let's-get-rid-of-busing platform. By then, the courts had pretty much gotten out of the business of desegregation. The school district was allowed to reinstitute neighborhood elementary schools, as long as it agreed to make certain accommodations for 16 high-poverty "priority" schools—including that they would be staffed by experienced and exceptional principals and teachers.

I arrived on the scene excited to be assigned to Blackshear Elementary, one of the 16 priority schools, where more than 95 percent of the students received free or reduced-price lunch. As a new teacher, I looked forward to being surrounded by veteran colleagues who would mentor and support me as I learned my new craft.

As it turned out, of the five of us assigned to second grade, four had never taught a lick. Our lone veteran colleague had fewer than five years under her belt. I received a quick lesson in how public school systems can work: promises made to communities (and courts) are not always kept.

At about this time, I was solicited through the mail by the Association of Texas Professional Educators, an anti-collective bargaining, anti-union teacher association. Its flier said, "We believe that strikes should be saved for the grand old game of baseball." Over 20 years later, I still recall the steam coming out my ears as I read this paean to passivity. Where I grew up, in Pennsylvania, my teachers were unionized and union workers at Bethlehem Steel forged the beams of the Golden Gate Bridge. I had learned my history too. Reading *The Jungle* in my public high school opened my eyes to an American history rife with abuse of the American worker. I knew that the labor movement played a very significant role in protecting workers' rights and promoting high-quality public schools.

In most states, the right of school employees to union representation is no longer a stirring issue for educators, but in Texas, state law prohibits collective bargaining. Unlike some southern states where the historical practice is to not engage in collective bargaining, in Texas, it is downright illegal, statutorily prohibited not only for teachers but for virtually all public employees (with a few exceptions for public safety workers). When I moved to Texas, I realized that as far as rights on the job are concerned, the clock had been turned back to pre-1960s America.

When I received the anti-union flier, I cursed the ignorance of it, but I didn't sit in the shadows swearing at the darkness. A few weeks later, I was contacted by the AFT affiliate, the Austin Federation of Teachers, Local 2048. I breathed fire into the phone about the flier I'd received. There was an organizer at my school the next day to sign me up as a new member.

The union, for me, was and continues to be a vehicle for forming relationships with people who share my interests and concerns. Within the first year, I signed up to be the building representative—there were only three AFT members at the school! In fact, although there were two AFT affiliates within the school district, a certified teacher local and a PSRP (paraprofessional and school-related personnel) local, the teacher local had fewer than 300 members spread across 80 schools.

The big group in town was the NEA affiliate. If somebody from

there had talked to me first, it's likely that I would have signed up with the NEA. As with the AFT, the NEA's positions on a lot of issues were similar to mine. Over time, I found that our local union was the little-but-loud group—the real union—so I embraced it.

One of my first initiatives as a building representative was to survey the 16 "priority" schools to find out if they had received the promised master teachers or any of the other promised resources. None of the 16 schools had received the experienced teachers. They did get other things, like reduced class sizes and a little extra money to take kids on field trips. So the district hadn't completely failed, but on the critical issue of quality teachers, nothing had been done. There certainly was quality teaching going on in those

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16 schools, but there were many, many greenhorns like me with precious little support.

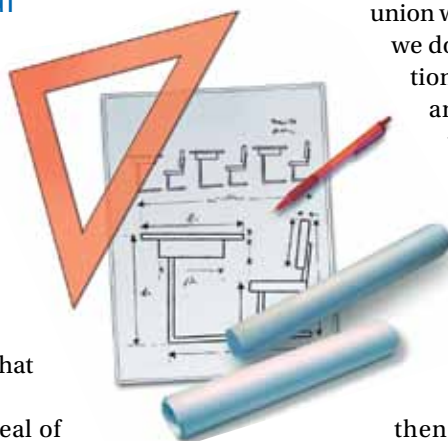
My first year, I literally got a cardboard box full of teacher's editions of textbooks and was turned loose with 15 second-graders. Nobody came into my room for weeks. Weeks turned into months, and I kept thinking to myself, "I can't believe they just put me in here with these kids! I've never taught before, and nobody is coming in here to see how I'm doing!" To make matters worse, I was the only bilingual second-grade teacher in my school, so I was the only person teaching my specific curriculum to kids in Spanish (their primary language) and English. It was an isolating experience.

Desperate, I eavesdropped on the four-year veteran's classroom, which wasn't difficult because our rooms were divided by a folding wall. During my planning period, I parked myself right next to the thin wall and, while grading papers, listened to her teach, to her pace and how she interacted with the kids. Aside from what I had learned from my student teaching, I really didn't know a lot about what I was supposed to be doing.

Nevertheless, I had the same experience many young, energetic teachers have. I fell in love with my students and their families. I poured in many hours and was astounded at how much I learned about children, and at how quickly my children learned. I went into teaching to work with poor, immigrant kids. I knew I would encounter a lot of really bright kids, but I was amazed by the children's capacity and potential. I ran an afterschool Shakespeare club for a couple of years in which we produced elementary school versions of several dramas, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

Despite the lack of mentoring and support, teaching was a great experience for me. It renewed my faith in the importance of public schools, especially for kids whose parents are immigrants or did not go to college. Working in a classroom every day puts one in touch with the unbridled potential that children bring with them to school. Yet, too often, school systems don't invest adequately in teachers, who, like students, fail to reach their potential as a result. They never become as good at teaching as they could be because they haven't been equipped. I think I was an example of how that happens. I was hard working, I was well intentioned—and I'm not saying I didn't have success in the classroom. But I had so much more to learn. My school district did not have a mentoring or induction program, or a well-articulated professional development program, although I did receive some good training here and there. How much more quickly could I have improved

My time in the classroom taught me there was a need for powerful institutions that could hold the district accountable to its students, staff, and community.



with a real expert by my side, and how would that have affected my students?

The union, in contrast, provided a great deal of leadership training. Even though we were a small local, we were part of a bigger network of local AFT affiliates around Texas. I enjoyed meeting other teachers' union leaders from around the state and hearing about their struggles. The Texas AFT had a very strong leadership development program, with summer training that covered how to run a local, the nuts and bolts of what a local should do: advocacy, organizing, grievance handling, internal and external communications, and consultation (which, as I'll explain later, is as close as we have gotten to collective bargaining).

By 1992, I was on the executive board of the Austin Federation of Teachers. We were still the little 300-member, lean, mean fighting machine. Our local president decided abruptly that she didn't want to continue to serve, and the board, which we jokingly renamed "the junta," managed the local for the remainder of that school year.

That was the end of my fifth year in the classroom. I had been accepted into the graduate program at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas. My plan was to take a leave of absence from school to earn a master's degree in public policy. The board members, thinking that I'd have more free time as a graduate student than they would as classroom teachers, asked me to run for president.

I agreed and was elected president of the local—a job that

came with many hours of work and a whopping \$50 a week stipend. For two years, I studied state governance, school finance, and other aspects of public policy. Meanwhile, every Monday night I was down at the school board meetings, and all week in the afternoons (when not in class) I was making fliers and visiting schools. Fortunately, it wasn't long before the Texas AFT assigned a staff person to my local.

At the end of graduate school, I had the choice between selling securities or becoming the local president full time, released from teaching. Although I received a very attractive offer from a major investment house, there was never a question in my mind about where I belonged.

## Building Power

My time in the classroom taught me there was a need for powerful institutions that could hold the district accountable to its students, staff, and community. But as the new leader of a very small affiliate, I actually felt a little resentment as I listened to Albert Shanker—the iconic president of the national AFT—say that fixing schools and providing professional development are union work. I kept thinking to myself: "In Austin, we don't even have the basic right of recognition. How can we have a meaningful role in any quality-of-education initiative when they don't even recognize us?"

Still, I reflected on the locals doing professional issues work: they were the big locals that had grown enough to negotiate with the district as a peer. They could make demands and back them up with people and money. I began to see a sequence for the union's work. First, we had to build power, and

then we could tackle our priorities. So we focused hard on growing the union and talking to teachers about our rights on the job. We also fought for better pay and health care choices.

Unlike my experience as a teacher, in my union work I was anything but isolated. In 1994, my local was awarded an AFT organizing grant, and we hired two organizers. We merged with the local AFT PSRP affiliate, which was called the Allied Education Workers, and Julie Bowman (the then-PSRP local president who now directs leadership development at the Texas AFT) became my copresident.

For five years, we went into schools and work sites, and we organized teachers and school support staff. We built a great local, we elected school board members, we recruited new members, we conducted surveys to find out what motivated our members, and we waged campaigns to improve pay and working conditions.

During this time, my sister began her teaching career in a suburban Philadelphia school district. I used her family as an example when I talked to Austin's school board. My brother-in-law and my nieces and nephews all had health coverage through my sister's teaching job, but in Austin we didn't receive any health coverage for our families. And I would ask: "Why are teachers in some states paid well and treated decently? Why are we so stingy here? Why do you think 18 percent of the staff leaves every year?" We



differentiated ourselves from the nonunion teacher groups by explaining that collective bargaining had helped school employees win basic workplace dignity as well as decent pay, pensions, and health benefits. And we kept building a strong organization.

At the heart of that organization were—and still are—the words printed on the original charter the AFT gave us in 1970: “Democracy in Education, Education for Democracy.” Our union is an autonomous government of school employees. It is democratic, its leaders are elected, and it is governed by a constitution. What separates democracies in the world from tyrannies of the left and the right is the ability of individuals to associate freely and to speak freely—the basics contained in the Bill of Rights.

Can you imagine employers discouraging their employees from voting? People would be outraged. Yet, that is exactly what employers do when they discourage employees from associating with one another and from forming unions. Protecting our rights, whether at work or in our neighborhoods, is an act of preserving the very underpinnings of democracy. The institutions that make up what we call civil society in this country are fragile and often under attack. Ernesto Cortes Jr. of the Industrial Areas Foundation\* has pointed out that mobility, technology, and changes in the way we live, work, and associate have transformed human relationships. The neighborhoods where everyone knew one another—went to school together, worked in the same factory, worshipped together—have given way to a more dislocated society. We have to find new ways to build community, and the places we must look to do that are our schools, our workplaces, our neighborhoods, and our places of worship. The ability to associate freely with your coworkers, to organize, and to bring forward common interests and concerns is fundamental to the health and well-being of American democracy.

These notions of building power were in the forefront of my mind as I thought about how to continue growing my local in the late 1990s. At the national level, the AFT and the NEA were talking about merging, but Texas remained one of the few areas of the country where AFT and NEA locals were still fighting each other. San Antonio’s representation fight in the mid-’90s was especially bitter. The AFT wrested representation away from the NEA affiliate, but it took a tremendous expenditure of time, money, and energy from both sides.

In Austin, Julie Bowman and I had been paying a lot of attention to the NEA affiliate, partly because we were raiding its members, but partly because we were beginning to question our tactics. If we take all the members from one group and move them into another group, we wondered, have we really made progress in terms of organizing? So we started talking to the NEA affiliate, informally at first, to imagine having one big organization. Soon we had a committee that met quarterly. Eventually we conducted a retreat with both locals’ boards.

The negotiations with the NEA local were like a courtship, but in reality we were working on two fronts. Even as we were arguing for the merger, our local worked independently to challenge the NEA’s status as the consultation representative with the district. Although collective bargaining is illegal in Texas, school boards are allowed to set up “consultation” mechanisms to take input

from their employees. Consultation can’t result in a contract, but agreements can be struck and the school board can adopt them as it would any other policy. Austin’s school board had a long-standing consultation policy that named the NEA affiliate as the teacher consultation representative. Our AFT affiliate convinced the board to change the policy to require a vote of the employees to elect the representative. We then told the NEA local that we intended to challenge its bid to become the representative—but that we would rather join together and create a new organization instead.

Initially, the NEA local’s leaders thought we were trying to take consultation away from them. We told them we didn’t want to take it away, we wanted to share it. Since both groups understood that we needed one voice speaking for all employees, we came

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together to create a single union.

With the date for the election for the consultation representative having been set by the school board, we all felt pressure to bring our courtship to a close. The national AFT and NEA brought in high-powered facilitators from Harvard Law School. With their help, using an accelerated six-month process, we went from rival organizations to allied groups with a merger agreement. Then it took another three months to educate the broader membership and take a vote on both sides.

We started the school year in 1999 with a new superintendent, a new merged union called Education Austin, and a consultation election in which Education Austin was overwhelmingly elected. It was the first time school employees in Austin had ever had the ability to vote on a representative. Our combined membership surged over the next couple of years because people who’d been on the fence about joining were energized by our unity. The funny thing about bringing together two organizations that share a common set of values and goals is that, at the grass-roots level, it inherently makes sense to the members. We surveyed members on both sides, and they overwhelmingly supported unification. They clearly wanted one big, strong organization.

The merger agreement called for a three-year transition in which we had a tripartite presidency of Julie Bowman, who was our PSRP president (the NEA affiliate did not have a PSRP division); Brenda Urps, the NEA local president; and myself. After three years, the tripartite presidency ended and I ran unopposed to be the president of Education Austin.

There were plenty of kinks to work out, but we have thrived as

\*To learn more about the Industrial Areas Foundation, see [www.industrialareasfoundation.org](http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org).

the first merged local affiliate in Texas. Amazingly, San Antonio followed us a couple of years later. Members there realized the only alternative to fighting was to figure out how to follow our path. Other smaller districts around the state also pulled together, although many parts of Texas remain a battleground for the AFT and the NEA.

During our merger talks, we understood that if coming together were just about becoming bigger, then despite what we say in Texas, bigger wouldn't necessarily be better. This new organization needed to actually be better than either of its predecessors. The merger process helped us define what a "better" union should look like. Probably the most important improvement was working to more fully engage our members. We agreed to create structures through which more members would not just pay dues and answer surveys, but would also become actively involved in the union, in politics, in professional issues, in the consulting process with the school district, and in outreach to the community.

Today, we have a large group of political action leaders, and myriad standing committees on issues such as early childhood education, special education, assessment, and transportation.

Soon after the merger, Austin Interfaith\* (a community organization affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation and made up of about 30 congregations, schools, and unions) asked our union to join them. The group saw the newly unified Education Austin as a power within the school district and the city. Being a part of Austin Interfaith has helped our union develop and work more broadly to build power. We have borrowed extensively from its organizing style. Education Austin's organizing model asks each individual: What are you interested in? What problems could we work together to solve? Are you willing to form relationships with other teachers and school employees to work on those problems? This approach has defined the union and been very productive. It has also challenged our leaders to take on issues like health care, immigration, housing, and other issues that aren't school issues per se, but that do affect our students and members. Now, our work is expanding again: Education Austin was recently awarded an AFT Innovation Fund grant to work with Austin Interfaith to do community school organizing. Austin Interfaith has a track record of successful school organizing, having worked in the 1990s to organize the parents, teachers, and community at 16 high-needs schools.

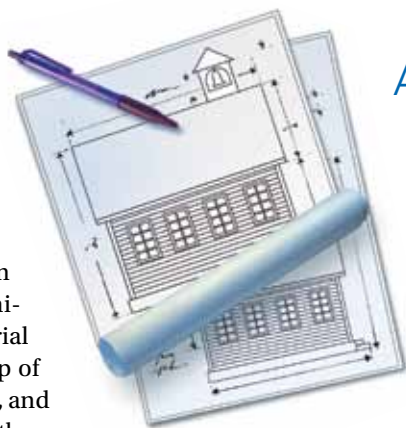
### Taking Up Shanker's Challenge

Right after the merger and consultation representative election in 1999, Education Austin focused on basic pay and health insurance issues. We negotiated decent pay raises. We persuaded the district to adopt an internal minimum wage for workers, so even the custodial and food service staff start off at a living wage. We

also negotiated leave benefits and training for employees. Then we began a long, hard push to include professional issues in our official consultation with the district.

I remember reading a "Where We Stand" column in which Al Shanker bemoaned the fact that when fighting to win collective bargaining, teachers and their unions were accused of only caring about their own pay and benefits—not caring about kids. But, Shanker said, when they won bargaining and tried to negotiate things that would be good for students, like reduced class sizes, they were told that it was not their concern. In city after city, management only wanted to bargain wages, hours, and working conditions. Shanker rightly pointed out the hypocrisy of calling teachers' unions self-interested while restricting what they could negotiate to wages and benefits.

In Austin, the same thing happened when we tried to introduce



Al Shanker rightly pointed out the hypocrisy of calling teachers' unions self-interested while restricting what they could negotiate to wages and benefits.

ideas that would be good for kids and for school quality, such as mentoring programs for new teachers and high-quality professional development for all teachers. We were told those things are management's prerogative. I remember the chief academic officer telling us, "I'll meet with you on the side about that, but we're not going to do that during consultation." It was frustrating.

One of the areas that we really had to fight hard on for many years was assessment, and in particular practice testing. Our district, like many districts over the last 10 years, ratcheted up the amount of time teachers are required to do practice testing with kids. We were told to administer beginning-, middle-, and end-of-year benchmark tests, plus six-week and nine-week tests. Some schools also gave three-week tests, and even weekly tests. None of these were teacher-made assessments. They were all designed to estimate how students would do on the end-of-year state assessment. One of our strongest committees in the last several years has been the over-testing committee. But until very recently, we were rebuffed every year, even though our proposals were reasonable requests, supported by a majority of teachers, to make some of the tests optional.

Recently, with our new superintendent, Meria Carstarphen, we were able to create a labor-management committee to review the district's testing regime. After a full year of work, we arrived at an agreement to significantly reduce the amount of practice testing and to spend another year designing meaningful formative assessments that will take up less class time and better guide instruction. This sort of labor-management partnership would have been unthinkable a decade ago, but with greater power and

\*To learn more about Austin Interfaith, see [www.austininterfaith.org](http://www.austininterfaith.org).

the political sophistication (on both sides) to engage around tough issues, we have improved the ability to get things done.

Compensation is another example of a difficult issue where labor-management collaboration has had some success. In 2006, we signed a two-year pay agreement, an unprecedented event because normally our pay negotiations are linked to the annual adoption of the budget. Teacher and support staff received raises of 11.5 percent over two years, and an extra \$4 million was set aside for development of a new alternative compensation plan that the union and district would design together. The compensation committee was jointly chaired by the human resources director, a business leader, and me. We already knew that we had strong resources from the AFT and the NEA, which both sent staff with experience in developing alternative compensation systems to help us. Many members got involved as the union worked with the district to create a large steering committee plus a smaller design committee. Our teachers helped the district understand that just paying more wasn't going to change anything—teachers needed better support and the right tools to improve.

The result of several years' worth of research, learning together, and work was the Austin Independent School District REACH program, which is now entering its fourth year as a pilot at 15 of our schools. In order to become a pilot site, two-thirds of the teachers had to vote in favor of participating.

REACH provides full-time mentors for teachers in their first three years, support for national board certification, schoolwide performance bonuses based on student growth on the state's reading and math assessments, and individual teacher bonuses based on teacher-developed student-learning objectives. We're comfortable with this approach to alternative compensation because teachers are well supported and the alternative pay is on top of the regular salary schedule. It was important to us to recognize and encourage teacher collaboration, so the state assessment results are only used for schoolwide incentives. Instead of looking at current achievement, the district looks at year-over-year growth of the same students and compares it with the growth in 40 similar schools. Bonuses are awarded to schools that rank in the top quartile on growth in reading and/or math. We were also careful in designing the individual incentives: they are teacher-selected student-learning objectives, and they are developed by all teachers in every subject and grade, so that the art teacher, French teacher, librarian, gym teacher, band teacher, pre-K teacher, etc., all set goals based on their students and the curriculum they teach.

REACH has started to create a culture of looking at data, setting measurable goals, and assessing personal and group performance. But that's only part of what makes it effective. The other part—probably the more important part—is the mentoring. All of the full-time mentors have completed the AFT's Foundations of Effective Teaching professional development course.<sup>†</sup> The first year, the union paid to send about seven people to the training. The district was so impressed by its quality that it paid the full cost for both the union and the district—around \$30,000—in the second year.

<sup>†</sup>Foundations of Effective Teaching is part of the AFT's ER&D (Educational Research and Dissemination) program, which is designed to enable local unions to provide their members with high-quality, research-based professional development, either on their own or in collaboration with their school districts.

When we designed REACH, our plan was to offer all pilot schools the alternative compensation, but to provide full-time mentoring only in the highest-needs schools (i.e., those with the highest concentrations of low-income students and English language learners). We quickly learned that mentoring should be offered to all pilot schools because all new teachers, not just those in our most challenging schools, are really interested in receiving extensive support and feedback. In addition, we found that mentoring new teachers is a huge relief to our senior teachers, who no longer felt pressured to assist their new colleagues. In fact, some senior teachers are seeking out the mentors because they want extra support too, especially in designing their student-learning objectives.

Going forward, all REACH schools will have the same supports, but the highest-needs schools will have added monetary incen-

One mistake I've seen new local presidents make is not grasping the difference between being political and being partisan. Even without collective bargaining, leaders can build power.

tives for teachers that include bigger performance bonuses and a retention stipend. For first- through third-year teachers, the retention stipend is \$1,000. For those who have been in the school more than three years, it's \$3,000. Use of a retention stipend is supported by research conducted by our district that links longevity at the school site with increased student performance.

This is the final year of the REACH pilot. We are still collecting data to determine program effectiveness, but there are some positive early results. We are hoping to expand the program to almost 40 schools, mainly our highest-needs schools.<sup>\*</sup>

Interestingly, working on the REACH program has deepened the union's relationship with the entire human capital development wing of the school district. The district now has a chief human capital officer who pays close attention to teacher leadership, professional development, the REACH program, and the development of a new, much more robust teacher induction program for the whole district.

REACH has also built our relationship with the chamber of commerce and the business community. The business community loves performance pay—but our business leaders have also appreciated that the program is a labor-management partnership. They've been real boosters and have supported raising the tax rate to help fund the program.

## Developing Leaders

Being a local union leader is transformative because it forces you  
(Continued on page 40)

<sup>\*</sup>To learn more about REACH, see [www.austin.isd.tenet.edu/inside/initiatives/compensation](http://www.austin.isd.tenet.edu/inside/initiatives/compensation).

## Professional Educator

(Continued from page 29)

to be political. You must engage with power wherever it is. One mistake I've seen new local presidents make is not grasping the difference between being political and being partisan. Being political is not just about winning elections. It's about reading the newspaper every day. It's about knowing what's going on in your community. It's about listening to your members. It's about developing other leaders. It's about building webs of relationships within the organization and the community that allow you to reach out and be influential. Even in the absence of collective bargaining, good leaders can still build power.

If you are not afraid to show up and not shut up, there are few limits to what you can get done if you have organized people standing with you.

Linda Bridges, the president of the Texas AFT, is a terrific example of acting politically to build power. When she was still the president of the AFT local in Corpus Christi, she successfully ran the mayor's campaign. She was a pioneer in the field of labor-management collaboration (without the safety or structure of a collective bargaining agreement) and won the prestigious Saturn Award for her local. Among many other responsibilities, she served on the board of the local community college and was president of the Coastal Bend Labor Council. She built relationships that in turn built the union. She understood that she had power because of the people standing behind her, and she used that power to build her strength and the strength of the organization.

As a local leader, I tried to follow Linda's lead, to be political but not partisan. When the new superintendent, Meria Carstarphen, came to town last year, I threw my arms around her, in a manner of speaking. I attended all the forums for staff and the community to get to know her. The school board, with whom we had already built a relationship, brought her to our office her first day on the job. Soon thereafter, she announced plans to hold a big convocation with all 11,000 district employees. I asked to get up on stage with her and talk to the district's employees. Although she spoke for an hour and I spoke for 10 minutes, there were only three people on that stage at the event: the president of the school board, the superintendent, and the union president (me). I was there for two reasons. First, my members put me there; they built the power and the strength to enable me to make the demand to be on stage. Second, I asked to be there. I insinuated myself into that situation. Woody Allen said that 80 percent of success is showing up. Sometimes it's awkward and

uncomfortable. But if you think and behave politically, if you are able to engage power by offering something and demanding something, and if you are not afraid to show up and not shut up, there are few limits to what you can get done if you have organized people standing with you.

One way to stay focused on the political and on building a broad base of support for the union is to ask a simple question: whom am I developing? It's a question all leaders and organizers should ask themselves constantly. It is not simply a matter of succession, as in "whom am I preparing to someday take my job." Whether you're staying or going, whether you're short term or long term, whether you're a building representative or a local president, you are only as effective as the other leaders you bring with you. I wish I had figured that out much earlier because I would have achieved more and maybe not had to work quite so awfully hard.

In organizations like ours, leadership is everything. But leadership isn't the person sitting at the top. Leadership is the relationships with other people, both inside and outside the union—relationships that bring people along, develop their talents, and tie them to one another through shared interests and a common understanding of what they want to see happen and what they are willing to do to make it happen.

My union includes members who lived in Section 8 housing, who were afraid to go to their children's school because they didn't think they belonged, but who now look mayors and senators and superintendents in the eye and talk to them about their interests and needs, and their community's needs. Some of these leaders have been cultivated by me and by other union organizers. Some of them have come through Austin Interfaith's leadership training. Seeing people grow into strong leaders makes me realize that, although our society is built on the notion of egalitarianism, we don't get social equity unless we teach people how to organize and exercise power. Building power through organizing makes the ideal of egalitarianism a reality.

In our local union, we are instituting a culture among our staff and our leaders to have deliberate conversations with others, to figure out who they are and what makes them angry and what they care about. This is the heart of effective organizing. There is power in knowing other people's stories. It opens up an understanding of what people's needs are, what their interests are, and what's motivating them. A strong organization doesn't just get people to sign up for a march; it knows what brought them to the march, why they chose to march instead of spending time with their family or going fishing. All people are motivated by strong experiences that have shaped them. The union's ability to tap into that, to build relationships and get people to know each other, sets us apart from other kinds of institutions and is our key to building leaders and power. In turn, our success at cultivating new leaders and building power will be directly proportional to our success at achieving our goals as a union. □

